

“A Three-Strand Cord”

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12; Colossians 3:12-17

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During my pastorate in Syracuse, New York, I served for several years on the board of the Inter-Religious Council of Central New York, the largest INTERFAITH organization in central New York. This is a pluralistic religious body which included more than just Christians and Jews but Muslims and Buddhists and Bahai among others. BECAUSE we focused on those things that UNITED us rather than SEPARATED us, we developed a bond more special than I experienced with many OTHER bodies or groups, and that includes other Presbyterian ministers as well. Together, we worked tirelessly on many projects including opening a center for new Americans, facilitating dialogue circles to promote greater racial and cross-cultural understanding, operating elder assistance programs, and offering spiritual care by providing chaplains to a number of upstate hospitals, nursing homes, and psychiatric facilities. We even held joint-worship services together which everyone participated in. I always felt that our fellowship was exactly the kind of community to be found in the kingdom of God, the way God intends ALL his children to live.

Sometime later, I attended a week-long pastor’s conference at Hastings College in central Nebraska where one of our teachers was a Presbyterian minister and Arabic scholar who taught classes on Islam. Throughout the week, he emphasized again and again how Islam is INDEED a beautiful and peace-loving religion that must be UNDERSTOOD rather than feared. He cautioned us against confusing “Islamism” (or those radical fundamentalist sects which seek global domination) with the religion of Islam itself which seeks nothing more than peaceful co-existence with her religious neighbors. The more we come into contact with them and understand them, the more we realize how we both share a loving and gracious God who is FAR GREATER than any one doctrine or even religion. Instead of focusing on the things that divide us such as one’s particular faith tenets or traditions, we need to be concentrating more on those things that UNITE us- on our common humanity and imperfect condition, on our universal hope for redemption and desire for a just world.

This became particularly evident to me around five years ago. A couple in my church in Indiana had a son who married a Muslim girl and subsequently converted to Islam so they and their children would share the same faith together. His imam was pastor of one of the largest mosques in Chicago, and after telling him about me, he expressed a sincere desire to meet me. Not long afterwards, he traveled from his home to mine so we could spend the afternoon getting to know one another. His name is Zacharias and having been born in Syria, he had become the spiritual leader of the largest group of Syrian Muslims in the Chicago area. For the next three hours, the two of us shared our lives and our faith together. Echoing the sentiments of that Presbyterian scholar I’d heard several years earlier, he said that there was far more that united us than separated us, that we shared the same God, though with different names, and revered the same figures such as sharing Abraham as a father of both our faiths. However, where they did not believe Jesus was the Savior as Christians do, they DID regard him as a great prophet whom

they loved and revered within their OWN tradition.

When it was time for him to head back, he gave me the warmest hug and said, “David, you are my brother in every sense of the word. It would be my great joy for you to come to my home and tour our mosque where you could meet some of the brothers and sisters there and break bread with us.” I returned the compliment and told him how I considered him MY brother AS WELL, and though there may be some distinctive theological differences between us, there was something EVEN DEEPER to unite us and that was OUR HEARTS. I expressed to him how much I would LOVE to visit him at his home and spend time deepening our friendship and understanding of our respective faiths. When he left, I was convinced that it was the Holy Spirit who had spoken to both of us, showing us how each of us in our own way was a partner and co-laborer in our Lord’s kingdom.

Aesop had a fable about an old farmer with three sons who quarreled amongst themselves from dawn till dusk. One day, the farmer fell gravely ill. Wishing to make peace among his sons before he died, he called them to his bedside and asked them to bring a thick bundle of sticks.

“Can you break these in two?” asked the farmer, handing the sticks to his oldest son.

“Of course!” the young man answered scornfully. But even though he tried until he was red in the face, he couldn’t break the bundle of sticks.

“Why, those sticks are no thicker than my finger,” mocked the second son.

“I could break those sticks like straw,” boasted the third. And they both tried with all their might, but neither could break the bundle of sticks in two.

Then the father drew three sticks from the bundle and handed one to each of his sons. “Can you break them NOW?” he asked. And they did so easily.

“Let the sticks teach you,” said the father to his sons, “how strong you are when you are allied together, and how easily you can be broken on your own.”

Of course, the moral of the story is obvious: strength is found in numbers, and unless people can come together as one, they will ALWAYS be weak and ineffectual. The importance of unity is certainly a Christian concern- a theme reiterated throughout the Bible. Think of the exhortation by Jesus to his followers to be one even as their Father in heaven is one with the Son and the Spirit. It would be through their UNITY, their love for each other inspired by a common purpose, that the world would then come to recognize the reality of the Godhead. The Bible tells us that they never DID become one until the day of Pentecost when they were assembled in one accord in the Upper Room. Only THEN did they receive the gift Christ had promised them- the gift of his own personal presence through the Holy Spirit. It was from that moment on that they began “turning the world upside down” for the glory of God. Without that unity of mind and heart and spirit, the Church could NEVER have become the tremendous historical force it has throughout the ages.

Our Old and New Testament lessons serve to UNDERSCORE this very lesson. The writer of Ecclesiastes is not a Jew but rather a Greek Stoic who says that two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor for if one falls, the other will be there to lift him up. And when two lie down to bed, they keep each other warm but one cannot keep warm by him or herself. And when one is alone he becomes vulnerable but the presence of ANOTHER

can help ward off any attackers. For Ecclesiastes, the moral of the story is that a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart, that when we stand united, we are never sturdier or stronger.

The Apostle Paul also knew the power of people coming together and working together as one. He knew better than ANYBODY that humanity's deepest need is for people to connect with one another through love. In Colossians chapter 3, he tells them that because they have been chosen of God and are therefore holy and beloved, they are to put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. They are to bear with one another, forgiving each other even as Christ has forgiven THEM. These virtues are then to be crowned with the most IMPORTANT one of all- LOVE, which is THE PERFECT BOND of unity. The idea here is that love is the manifestation of the new life in Christ and love what leads to maturity and unity in his body. Such love removes all feelings of anger, hatred, or an unforgiving spirit. It is the binding power which holds the whole Christian body together. The different members are not to strive against themselves but to assist each other and work for the good of the WHOLE body as well as for the good of each other. It is like the keystone of an arch which both COMPLETES the structure and HOLDS all the other stones in place. Paul says this because he knows that the tendency of ANY body of people is sooner or later to fly apart- love is the ONLY thing which will hold all persons together in an unbreakable fellowship.

And yet, if as Paul says LOVE is the main force, the glue that causes us to adhere to one another IN SPITE of our many differences, why then is it so hard for us to REALIZE this goal in our daily lives. We call the Church the "Body of Christ" and yet it is divided into a great VARIETY of "bodies," often ranged over against each other, separated and even estranged from one another with each side claiming to be right and the other wrong. We saw this last week when we looked at Paul's criticisms directed at the church in Corinth, a congregation he had established and held in great love but was now riven with all kinds of conflict and social injustices. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul instructed the church that there was no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, and yet we continue to create within it our own little SUBGROUPS, our own little "church within a church" with whom we socialize with, one often drawn along social or economic or racial lines. As Martin Luther King famously observed, 11:00 on Sunday mornings is the most segregated hour in all of America. The sad fact is that if people are reluctant to even believe there IS a God much less listen to the message the church proclaims, maybe it is because they see in us so LITTLE unity, the absence of a TRUE oneness that could only be created by the bond of love.

But there is hope and nowhere is it more epitomized than in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper! Throughout the Bible, the sharing of a meal is an occasion of true unity and spiritual healing, in short, a means for sharing the gift of love with others. The scriptures speak of "the Day of the Lord," that period at the end of history when Christ will return to judge the earth and put all things under his feet. At that time, the Church--as the Bride of Christ"--will then become "wedded" or united to him for all eternity. We will finally fulfill the purpose and achieve the unity for which we've been created which is COMPLETE AND UNBROKEN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. This marriage or union with Christ is symbolized in the book of Revelation as a great wedding feast, what it refers to as "the Marriage Supper of the Lamb." In fact, every time the People of God gather for Holy Communion, it prefigures or serves as a FORETASTE of that occasion. Through the act of sitting down together and sharing a simple meal, we experience a

kind of unity we don't find anywhere else, a moment of real grace that is felt both individually and collectively.

Some of you may remember the 1987 film *Babette's Feast*, based upon a short story by Isik Dinesen. It perhaps illustrates this unity and love better than anything else I've ever seen. Babette is an extraordinary French chef who has to flee Paris and comes to Norway to live and work in the home of two sisters. The sisters are the daughters of a minister who had founded their tiny conservative community of believers years before. The pastor was now long dead and the once-vibrant community had become puritanical, strict, and joyless. It was quarrelsome and filled with all manner of dissension just as the church in Corinth had become.

Neither the sisters nor anyone ELSE in the town knows that Babette is a famous chef. For fifteen years, she cooks strictly according to the sisters' rules and recipes, preparing rather dull, poor-tasting meals. She has always had a dream of winning the French lottery which would enable her to finally return home. Every year she buys a ticket and then one day to her great surprise, she wins- ten thousand francs. But rather than return home with the money, she chooses instead to make a gift to the community. Soon will be the birthday celebration of the founder of the community, and to show her gratitude, Babette offers to cook a French meal for everyone.

There are all a little nervous about it at first, especially of a French dinner with its rich foods and wines. Reluctantly, they agree to her proposition, but vow to themselves that they will not ever think about the food they eat. They will occupy their minds with only SPIRITUAL things and not even taste what they eat and drink- they don't want to do anything that God would disapprove of. Babette goes ahead and orders all the provisions from France and soon the gourmet delights start arriving for the dinner. At the last minute, an outsider is invited to the feast, a famous general who was vacationing with his aunt. Years before, he had met the two sisters and had even fallen secretly in love with one of them. On the assigned day, the community of about twelve persons gathers around the table in the sisters' home for the meal. After grace, the waiter pours the first wine of the evening, one the general is quite familiar with. "Why this is very strange. Amontillado. And the FINEST Amontillado that I have ever tasted." As the meal progressed, he showed SIMILAR amazement at the quality of the food and its expert preparation. He takes a small spoonful of the soup. "This is exceedingly strange," he remarks aloud. "For surely I am eating turtle soup—and what turtle soup it IS!"

Where the rest of the community had been silent, they now start to become animated THEMSELVES, enjoying the feast which they had determined they would NOT enjoy. Served the next dish, the general is once AGAIN in awe. "INCREDIBLE! It is Blinis Demidoff." And then with the next glass of wine, he takes a sip, sets it down, and exclaims, "Why, this is VEUVE CLIQUOT 1860." As the meal proceeded, the spirit of the group grew lighter and warmer. Everyone not only enjoyed the FOOD but also EACH OTHER.

Then came the MAIN dish, a quail delicacy that only one chef in the world could have prepared. It was a dish the general ate once in Paris and had never forgotten. The meal had turned the Parisian Café into a love affair, noble and romantic, in which one no longer distinguished between the physical and the spiritual. Now this same extraordinary dish was being served in this quaint Norwegian home. The general could not believe his eyes OR his taste

buds.

The table talk grew more congenial, and grievances and tensions soon disappeared. The community members even began commenting on the food ITSELF! The meal had become a sacramental moment in which the physical took on deep spiritual significance. The community was a community again, brought together by Babette's feast. Ancient feuds were being settled with old accounts squared and old flames rekindled. The general even confesses his long-repressed yearning to the one sister. As the guests leave, old enemies are now arm in arm amid the falling snow.

The day AFTER the feast, the sisters expect to say farewell to Babette. Thinking that she saved a fair share of the lottery winnings, they are convinced that after these many years she will now return home to France. Babette says, however, that she is going to remain with THEM for she has no money left. The sisters are stunned. Says Babette, "The cost for such a banquet for twelve at Café Anglais in Paris is 10,000 francs." In other words, every penny she had won had gone to the purchase and preparation of that meal. She had given her all to these people and their lives would never again be the same for her generous and loving gesture.

Friends, it's not hard to be touched by this simple story for it is OUR story AS WELL. Babette serves as a kind of Christ figure, one who gives everything of herself in order to save the community. Through such a selfless and sacrificial act of love, people were able to lay aside their many differences so as to enjoy the GREATER good of true union with each other and thus become a REAL community for the first time in years. And the guests are really representative of OURSELVES, that as they were able to forget about their OWN hurts and conflicts because of the GREATNESS of the gift placed before them, so can WE as the Body of Christ learn to lay aside OUR hurts and OUR disappointments and OUR conflicts in light of the surpassing gift WE have received through the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God.

If as Paul said, "in Christ there IS no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free," then in the same spirit of those words, let there ALSO be no Muslim or Christian, no gay or straight, no Republican or Democrat, I'm vaccinated and you're not, I wear a mask and you don't. Of course there are differences, but we can work them out PEACEABLY instead of drawing sides and threatening one another as we see going on all over the country. As Children of God and members of a family so large I am convinced it encompasses more than just the Christian Church, let us CLAIM that unity, and WORK to build BRIDGES between us instead of DAMS to divide us. In this way, we can model what REAL love is to a broken and very discordant world. May his love remain the cord, the binding that keeps us unified, that keeps us one IN SPITE of our differences and disagreements, IN SPITE of our divisions and disappointments for we are never stronger than when we are together. Let us pray...

*Gracious God and Everlasting Father of us all, help us to strive for and live in that unity you desire for your creation. Help us to see each other as one family and the whole earth as one home. We do not ask for a perfect world, only a BETTER one. In Christ's name we pray.
Amen.*